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DE RUEHMN #0189 0961948
ZNR UUUUU ZZH (CCY ADX4E9572 MSI1072 540A)
R 061948Z APR 09 ZDS
FM AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8928
INFO RUCNMR/MERCOSUR COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS MONTEVIDEO 000189

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV ECON UY

SUBJECT: URUGUAY'S SUCCESS WITH THE ONE LAPTOP PER CHILD PROGRAM

¶1. Summary: Uruguay has taken a leading role in realizing the aims of the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) initiative and, under the auspices of its "Project Ceibal," as the project is known locally, is close to its goal of delivering a laptop to every child in the country. A recent poll has linked the success of this project to an explosive increase in domestic internet use, above all in the country's interior. End Summary.

¶2. In October 2007, Uruguay became the first country in the world to place an official order for child-friendly laptops from the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project. The OLPC laptop -- called the "XO" -- is designed to be used by children in developing countries. It has built-in wireless, is durable, waterproof, solar-powered, exceptionally energy efficient, automatically networked and has a special display that is readable outside, even in harsh sunlight. Although Uruguay's initial order was for 100,000 units, the GOU's declared ambition was to secure a total of 220,000 machines to be distributed to every 5-12 year old child (plus their teachers) in the country by the end of 2009. With 172,000 already delivered by the end of 2008 and 91 percent of those who already have the computers able to depend on either wireless or satellite internet provision, the project appears to be well on its way to achieving this aim.

¶3. The GOU endeavor, named 'Project Ceibal' (after the national flower) is being administered by the Ministry of Industry's Technical Laboratory with support from, among others, the state telecommunications company (ANTEL) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC). Schools, where the computers are distributed and the children taught how to use them, are critically important to the project's success. Initially, though, some teachers expressed reservations toward the proposal, complaining that not only had the decision to carry it out been taken at the executive level with no consultation, but also that the project's USD 15 million budget would be better directed to alleviating children's social problems or improving teachers' pay. After a pilot scheme in the small southern interior town of Cardal proved successful, however, the project's positive reputation quickly grew. In addition to receiving laptops themselves, teachers are also receiving training on how best to integrate them into their curricula. By the end of 2008, 18,000 teachers had already completed their basic XO training.

¶4. The advances achieved by Project Ceibal have started to have a significant impact on the country's overall internet usage. For the last six years, annual polls carried out by Uruguay's Radar Group have tracked the numbers of Uruguayans who consider themselves to be "on-line." This year's questionnaire, the results of which were announced at the end of March, recorded a jump of 240,000 new users, bringing the total to a record 1,340,000 users, or 41 percent of the country. The report directly attributes the spike in internet usage to the influx of XO computers. With a new, cheaper internet package recently made available by state-run ANTEL, it is possible that these figures will continue to rise at high rates.

¶5. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of Radar's findings is that the use of home computers in the interior has grown by 150 percent since the beginning of the decade. In Montevideo, which is home to 64 percent of all internet users in the country, the rate of increase has been just 30 percent for the same period. Such is the

proliferation that the percentage of homes with computers in the interior is only slightly less in number than in Montevideo (49.6 per cent compared to 50.7 percent). The report also found that just over half of all internet users are women and that 63 percent of users are under 30.

¶6. COMMENT: The GOU claims much credit for exhibiting leadership in promoting the socially innovative OLPC program. While continued funding, research and maintenance will be crucial in ensuring the project's long-term success, Plan Ceibal's achievements to date constitute a significant feather in the cap of the ruling Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition, a fact that the FA will no doubt continue to highlight in this electoral year.

SCHANDLBAUER